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Spy vs. counter-spy

Sensible presidential decisions on international policies and actions require good intelligence. But public discussions generally are conducted without adequate intelligence information and estimates. One result is unproductive public debate about what defense strength we require. Other consequences, suggested by recent events, are questions about whether our intelligence is good enough and whether we are prevailing in the undercover contest of counter-intelligence.

Quickly suppressed news reports a month ago revealed that a well-placed person in the British communications intelligence organization was found to be a Soviet spy. The U.S. and Britain coordinate closely on intelligence collection, exchanging data as well as judgments on its implications. Thus the Soviets may have known for some time what we thought about their defense capabilities and vulnerabilities.

Because our conclusions might spur altered U.S. forces and tactics, the Soviets would have sought with bogus intelligence sources to cast doubt on accurate information we collected. We must now question the intelligence sources we thought useful before the British spy was uncovered. We must now re-examine past decisions about what armed power and weapons systems would best serve the Western nations.

Beyond those uncertainties, there is evidence that our strategic intelligence is either deficient or subject to uncorrectable limitations against which our foreign and security policies should guard.

The U.S. declared surprise at the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and at Argentine aggression against the Falkland Islands. We were insufficiently alerted about the Soviet attacks in Afghanistan. We warned Moscow against Soviet armed repression in Poland, and the Polish army did it instead.

Unpublicized alarms about potential aggression in other areas originate from faulty information and analysis. We justify our embargo against the Soviet gas pipeline into Western Europe, in part, on hurting the Soviet economy. Yet our allies using similar economic and political information conclude that a coercive Soviet bureaucracy retains effective options. Faced, in Iran, with the same Soviet political motivations that led to the Afghanistan invasion, we have no visible policy apparently because our intelligence in Iran is inadequate.

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Each of these troubling examples poses current or foreseeable problems for U.S. strategic interests. Continued efforts go forward to improve the quality of our intelligence sources and estimates, but conditions in this age are such that a warning of crisis will be short and often unclear. Modern experience shows aggression across borders or internal subversion may materialize after ambiguous signals that delay responses until the then-undeterred action occurs.

Deception or disinformation, both Soviet skills, may be used to extend and exaggerate warning ambiguities. If we react to one impending crisis by readying and deploying military forces from afar, a clever foe may take advantage of weaknesses then created at other points.

In these circumstances, it is doubtful if American foreign interests can have the protection of armed power unless we are able to deploy peacetime forces continuously in regions of importance. Such regional forces may help deter preparations for aggression or subversion and, if hostile actions nevertheless occur, provide defenses that otherwise might be critically delayed because warning was short or ambiguous. That policy requires more capable U.S. and allied armed forces and gives credence to Reagan defense budgets.

The question of the best form for those defense forces and capabilities is another matter, particularly since decision-makers may be confused by inadequate or bogus intelligence information. Both our technical and human sources of intelligence can be fooled.

The uncovering of the most recent British spy is but one of a series of defections in NATO Europe that suggests Moscow has enough information on what we know to carry out useful campaigns of deception and disinformation. We have no choice other than strengthening our own counter intelligence activities, improving the security of our information, and diversifying our intelligence sources.

Finally, there is the issue of providing requisite intelligence support so that a policy can be developed for keeping the Soviets out of strategically critical Iran. Soviet control in that country would be a disaster for our security and influence in the Persian Gulf and throughout the Middle East. The only thing worse than mistaken policies is no policy at all.

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